

THE REGION

## Investigation of Fish and Wildlife Office Sought

**Congressman says he is concerned that policies on endangered species increased fire risk.**

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December 21, 2003

Rep. Ken Calvert (R-Riverside) has called for a congressional investigation of the Carlsbad office of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, concerned that the office delayed prescribed burns in areas overtaken by the Old and Grand Prix fires.

State and local firefighters have said that their projects would have helped to manage the wildfires. Carlsbad Fish and Wildlife officials have admitted that some former employees who opposed prescribed burns may have dragged their feet in reviewing reports on the burns' impact on rare species.

"This is not a witch hunt," Calvert said. "We're looking to see if individuals in the department have overstepped their authority." Calvert, who is the only Inland Empire representative on the House Resources Committee, requested the inquiry last week in a letter to the committee chairman, Rep. Richard W. Pombo (R-Tracy). He expects a hearing in February.

Calvert said it was not the first time Southland residents have complained that the Carlsbad office's policies on endangered species have increased fire risk. Riverside County residents had complained after the 1993 Winchester fire that Fish and Wildlife was so concerned about the Stephen's kangaroo rat that the residents could not clear brush or build firebreaks around their homes.

Calvert also prompted the 2001 General Accounting Office audit that found consistent, unexplained delays in the Carlsbad Fish and Wildlife office. "We don't need unnecessary roadblocks," he said. The intent of environmental protection laws "is not to kill people and destroy property."

Fish and Wildlife officials said in a statement that the agency "places the highest priority on addressing projects that may affect human health and safety."

"Staff from the Carlsbad Fish and Wildlife office, many of whom live in or near communities affected by the recent wildfires, are working cooperatively with local, state and federal agencies to implement projects essential to protecting lives and community," the California/ Nevada operations office said.

Jon Keeley, a research scientist with the U.S. Geological Survey, said he doesn't think Fish and Wildlife did anything wrong. "I think the congressman is totally out of line," he said.

When fires are driven by Santa Ana winds, he said, the age of fuels does not matter, and agencies cannot do anything to stop the fires.

Keeley, who often opposes controlled burns, said burns at the urban fringes, however, can help firefighters protect homes. "I think what Southern California needs to do is move on to a system where any new development has to be approved by fire management people," he said.

Firefighters, however, cheered the possible investigation. "Clearly we need to know what can be done to improve the process," said San Bernardino Fire Chief Larry Pitzer.

"There was extreme frustration and never-ending hoops for us to jump through," he said. "But in fairness, over the last year or thereabouts, there have been improvements, and people there that had the desire to function in a logical and professional way." The break in the logjam, he added, just came too late to help their response to the Old fire.

The Sierra Club, which believes that prescribed burns can be balanced with habitat conservation, also applauded Calvert's announcement. "Clearly there was some breakdown in communication between the county and Fish and Wildlife," said Bill Corcoran, the club's regional representative. "If Fish and Wildlife needs more resources or a better system to process applications for prescribed burns, let's get it to them."

The city of San Bernardino got approval for a federal grant in 1995 and planned to move forward with two burns when the Old fire swept through. The San Bernardino unit of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection received its grant in 1997, but withdrew its application after four years of wrangling with the Carlsbad office.

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